

Sri Sarada Society Notes

Dedicated to Holy Mother

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APPLIED VEDANTA, ACTIVISM, AND MOTHER

In recent years I have been engaged as a political activist. Remembering a time when the political world seemed very unappealing, I could never have imagined that politics would capture my interest, much less be a means of spiritual practice.

Because of my disability, I was invited to sit on my first government advisory committee soon after I graduated from college. I took my responsibilities seriously. It seemed that my commitment to truth, fairness, and reason were appreciated, even in demand, as requests for my service kept coming. Values were always important to me, but I naively connected them with results. Like the child who learns that rewards come from being good, I thought that “right outcomes” came from being principled. I worked hard to try to make certain these outcomes came about without realizing that I was being driven by my own expectations, however selfless they may have been. The more these efforts failed, the more confused and helpless I felt. It seemed that my values had failed me. Thus I found refuge in Vedanta, which taught that we have values for their own sake. I welcomed this as my first lesson. Something in me wanted to hold onto my values and Vedanta reassured me. Since it was the world that failed me, not my values, I assumed I had permission to “give up” being politically aware or involved in any way.

I think many of us come world-worn to Vedanta, hear the sublime teachings that the world is not real, and think, “Wow!” We begin throwing off past connections that have given us the most trouble and say, “Good riddance!” As spiritual aspirants, we may need to distance ourselves from a situation in order to gain new skills and perspective. I certainly needed to withdraw and was in no hurry to “get back into the thick of it.” I hadn’t yet realized that I could be involved in a different and more effective way.

So you may imagine my surprise when, several years later, a swami told me that I had to vote because it was my duty as a citizen to do so. As “my duty as a citizen” has continued to broaden and feel more and more natural, I see the positive effects of 20 years in Vedanta. First and foremost, I no longer carry the burden of success. After participating in one effort, I can move on to the next. Activism calls for this kind of shifting of attention and readiness to act.

Usually I have cited Swami Vivekananda’s teachings about karma yoga to explain how I can hope to make political involvement a spiritual practice. However, when a brother devotee told me recently, “I don’t get involved in political concerns. They will be resolved by the will of the Lord,” I found myself thinking not of Swamiji, but of Holy Mother.

“Everything, no doubt, happens by God’s will,” said Mother, “yet one must work because God expresses his will through man’s actions. Do not relax your spiritual practices.”

Vedanta proclaims that we are divine in nature and that in our interaction with the world around us we are much like actors on a stage. We are called to play our roles purposefully, with the truest intentions, while always being aware that we act in a broader production. This gives us the ability to mentally step back in the midst of acting and enjoy the show, just as an audience at a stage play is entertained. The more we are able to see ourselves as actors in a divine production, the less we are disturbed by the success or failure of our actions. Hence Holy Mother adds in the quotation above, “Do not relax your spiritual practices,” in order that we may lessen our attachments and eventually realize, for ourselves, God as the doer of all action.

I have been asked by devotees, “If all is God’s will, how can you take a particular position on anything?” I believe we must be committed to doing the best we can, with the purest motives we can muster, just as the stage actor plays his or her part well. The stage actor knows how the play ends, but most likely had no part in writing it. We do not know the outcomes. This is where faith enters in.

Mother spoke against various injustices and encouraged action by others. “If you don’t protest against such heinous action,” she asked a disciple, “who will do so?” It appears from this that Mother preferred activism to indifference.

An activist mentor of mine likes the statement: “Who says activism can’t be fun?” Vedanta affirms that it most certainly should be! For at the heart of being able to have fun is the gentle Vedantic reminder that we are not to take our actions and the outcomes of any effort too, too seriously.

Jayanti Hoye

IN MOTHER’S WORDS: “It is essential that one work. It is through work alone that one may break asunder the bonds of karma; only then is one free from desires. One shouldn’t be without work even for a moment.”

PRAVRAJIKA BHAKTIPRANA: ON PHYSICAL CHALLENGE

Pravrajika Bhaktiprana passed away on March 30. She had been a monastic for 53 years. During her early years in Vedanta, she studied Sanskrit and Vedanta philosophy under Swami Bodhananda of the Vedanta Society of New York. She joined the convent in Hollywood in June of 1954, and in 1965 she received her sannyas vows from Swami Prabhavananda of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. A graduate of Juilliard, Bhaktiprana loved music, and she encouraged devotees who sought to express Vedanta through the arts. She was instrumental in the founding of a Vedanta center in San Diego, where she gave monthly lectures for many years. In later life she undertook an intensive study of Spanish, giving classes on Vedanta in Spanish in California, Mexico, and Brazil.

Bhaktiprana's cheerfulness and fortitude in the face of physical suffering inspired all who knew her. She shared her experiences and insights with readers of SRI SARADA SOCIETY NOTES in 2001. We have reprinted that interview here, in loving memory.

Q: How does a devotee deal with changes in the body as one ages? How does one integrate them into one's spiritual life?

A: Well, it seems to me that these things come on so gradually that one is not really aware of what's happening. As far as physical handicaps go, sometimes they start very early in life, and you do not really realize the extent of what's going on. For instance, my ankylosing spondylitis, the onset was when I was first out of college in 1945, and I passed it off just thinking it was nerves. I did not go to a doctor. I only had spells of being unusually stiff for a couple of weeks at a time, about twice a year. It wasn't until 20 years later that I discovered I had an arthritic ailment of ankylosing spondylitis, arthritis of the spine. That makes one a little more objective about one's ailment, knowing that you have something that is completely something you cannot prevent. It is just hereditary. They say that spondylitis is passed on through the male gene. When I told my father, he said, "Oh, yes, your grandfather had it." So that puts a new light on it. It is not something that you have done particularly, or something that you can help. It is just a factor that you have to deal with and find out what you can do to make it bearable or better or improved in whatever way is possible. So it makes you a little more accepting and a little more objective about the whole thing. As Swami Bodhananda used to say, "The taxes we pay for the use of the body." So that makes it a little more something that, well, it may be just natural and you have to live with it, so you do the best you can. Therefore, I think that helps a lot.

Q: If you're having a little crisis, how do you handle it spiritually speaking?

A: I think one has to consider there is a fact of karma, and everybody has something, some kind of ailment or some kind of debilitation that comes sooner or later. So you just accept that this is par for the course. This is what I've got—somebody else may get cancer or some other horrible ailment. So I think that when it comes on slowly and at an early age, you have more opportunity to just accept it and find out in a very matter of fact way what you can do to improve it or what you can do to prevent its getting worse or slow down its getting worse. So I don't think that it is that big a deal. There is no use fighting against it.

Q: What about the osteoporosis?

A: Osteoporosis I didn't discover until a few years ago when they gave me a bone scan. I felt a little bit disappointed in my doctors. I know that I have had very good doctors, but they didn't suspect it in my case because of my history and because of the other aspects and factors of my debilitation—they didn't suspect that I might have osteoporosis. So, well, I have osteoporosis. What to do for it? Get some medicine, do some exercise, and surrender it to the Lord. I mean...everything is done as an offering to God. We try to offer up our very best, but when we haven't got the best to offer, why we offer what we have. It reminds me of the story of Krishna dancing on the serpent. The serpent tells him, "Well, Lord, all I have to offer is poison. That's the best offering I can give you."

When you first receive the news that you have something incurable or irreversible, it may hit you like a blow and one can't help but be briefly upset... But later, when you can be more objective, you can remember that other people have things that are worse. No matter how bad it is, one can always think of instances that are worse, and be glad one does not have something that turns out to be worse than what you have. I think that having an inner life, some kind of spiritual discipline, spiritual beliefs, ambitions, or faith, does help one to prepare for aging as well as for any calamities that may happen in one's life. I think it makes it easier to stand back and be a little bit more detached. We have to remember that the things that people do and say when they find out they have an incurable illness—naturally, it is a shock. But one can come to terms with it, I think, by just remembering that it is the body. Even though you feel it in the body, you feel the suffering, and sometimes it may be to a point where you cannot keep your equanimity, I think if one works at it, at just trying to put it at the Lord's feet and surrender to the Divine Mother, or whatever aspect appeals to you, that you can overcome it to some extent.

Learning and growing toward fullness of being happens as one continues one's spiritual practice, and even though it is frustrating sometimes when the mind does not cooperate, which may be most of the time, at least one has the

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Book Review

HOLY COMPANY

Photographs of Sri Ramakrishna-Sarada Devi. Researched by Swami Vidyatmananda and Dr. (Ms.) Purba Sengupta. Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2003, 92 pps.

Before the age of the photograph, people wishing to worship the divine in human shape in the form of images had to use paintings or statues in temples or churches. By the nineteenth century, at least, in an age of mechanical reproduction, pictures of the divine were available to the worshipper not only in established houses of the divine but in the form of affordable paper or wooden images. In the Russian and Greek Orthodox traditions, for example, people worshipped the Virgin Mary alone or with the Christ Child, or St. George slaying the dragon, both in churches and in their homes, in the form of icons: brightly painted formulaic paintings that were available at many price ranges and in large and small sizes.

With the coming of photography, in the nineteenth century, the image of the divine person could be reproduced indefinitely. In the Ramakrishna tradition, we are fortunate to have a number of photographs of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother, who, the publisher of the present volume reminds us, are the “first of the incarnations to be photographed.” Until recently, photographs of both Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother were available to view and worship in temples; if a devotee wanted to purchase them for worship at home, they were available only in single copies of various sizes. But now we have this wonderful book, in large format with glossy pages, which contains three photographs of Sri Ramakrishna and thirty of Holy Mother. Each photograph is numbered in large letters at the bottom of the page, and each photograph is provided with the place and date of the photograph and the name of the photographer, when these data are known. Furthermore, across from each photograph, on the left side, is an anecdote relating either to the context of the photograph itself or in reference to the subject of the photograph.

That both Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother felt that photographs contained the image of the divine is clear from the publisher’s words that each of them worshipped their own photograph as an image of the divine. What is even more significant is that Holy Mother was once brought a photograph of herself, after which she “with great devotion touched it with her forehead.” When a lady devotee asked her why she was paying respect to her own photograph, Mother, realizing that the woman thought it strange for her to be worshipping her own photograph, answered: “Why dear? Sri Ramakrishna is present in this photo also.” Furthermore, monks at the Koalpara ashrama in 1911, on the occasion of a visit from Holy Mother to dedicate a photograph of

Sri Ramakrishna for the shrine there, set a photograph of Holy Mother next to that of Sri Ramakrishna, knowing that “worship of the Lord is always accompanied by that of his Shakti, or power,” as recorded in an account by Swami Ishanananda that is mentioned in the book. Holy Mother worshipped both photographs in the Koalpara Ashrama on that occasion. The book assumes that Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother were “inseparable, as heat is from fire,” in the words of Swami Saradananda’s famous hymn, indicating this in its title: “Sri Ramakrishna-Sarada Devi.” What that means for someone who wishes to use the book for worship is that, by worshipping one of the divine figures, one is also worshipping the other—though, since the photographs are of the two of them as individuals, one might feel drawn to the photograph of one or the other figure when worshipping.

The book is clearly designed to be used by the individual reader as a means to worship. To this end, a saying of the divine figure is placed under each photograph. For example, under photograph Number 6 of Holy Mother, which the book informs us was taken by B. Dutta in his studio on Chitpore Road, Baghbazar, Calcutta, in 1905, is the famous saying of Holy Mother: “I am the Mother of the wicked, as I am the Mother of the virtuous. Never fear.” Whether or not one later associates this particular photo with these particular words of Mother, the placement of Mother’s words together with her photograph, when one looks at the photograph, stimulates spiritual thought as well as feeling. It is as if Mother were there before one, speaking personally to the devotee, and as if Sri Ramakrishna were present speaking to one when one looks at his photograph.

We owe a great debt to the two individuals, one American and one Indian, who conducted the research on which this book is based and whose work, coming together in this book, demonstrates that the attraction to these two divine souls knows no boundaries. Thanks to the publisher, devotees can worship either or both of these two souls, or both of them together, if they can experience the two as one, at home, at work, or on a journey.

Janet Walker



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CROSSING PATHS WITH A GIANT

Continuing our series on women who have helped in shaping Vedanta in America, we are pleased to offer this article on Elizabeth Copeland (also known as “Cuppy”) by Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana of Sri Sarada Math, Dakshineswar, Kolkata, India, whom Elizabeth had hosted when the sannyasini visited the United States.

When Elizabeth Copeland began attending Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, she was still unaware of Swami Vivekananda and that he had spoken on campus. She took a course in comparative religions, which motivated her to buy a copy of the *BHAGAVAD GITA* from a local bookstore, translated with commentary by Swami Nikhilananda. Elizabeth soon found herself at the Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center in New York. She became the swami’s disciple in 1951 and continued a regular correspondence with him after her return to Massachusetts. According to his advice, she attended the lectures of Swami Akhilananda, who had gone to Boston to establish the new Ramakrishna Vedanta Society.

Elizabeth was leaving to go to one of these lectures one day when her elderly aunt asked what lecture she was going to. Elizabeth hesitatingly replied, “It is a lecture by a swami.”

“Oh, a swami!” exclaimed her aunt. “Do you know, a swami stayed at our house when we were children?”

“Really?” Elizabeth was taken by surprise.

“Yes. Swami Vivekananda.”

Elizabeth never knew how she managed to drive to the lecture, dizzy with the knowledge that Swami Vivekananda had stayed in her grandfather’s home in Lowell, Massachusetts. When she returned later that day she plied her aunt with questions about Swamiji. She learned that he had entertained the children by rewinding the endless yards of the cloth of his turban for them. And her aunt remembered Swamiji’s very large bright eyes.

Elizabeth was present when her aunt passed away and heard her last utterance: “My God, Vive...!”

Elizabeth’s grandfather, Philip Young, was a minister at a Unitarian church. He had invited Swami Vivekananda to be his houseguest and to speak at his church in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1894. Elizabeth kept a *BIRTHDAY BOOK* of daily *BIBLE* quotations, belonging to one of her aunts, which Swami Vivekananda had autographed with the message, “Do in childhood what will avail you in age.” She also proudly displayed an elaborately ornamented silver tea set (complete with sugar bowl, cream pitcher, butter dish, spoon holder, and other items), which Swami Vivekananda had used. She would use it only when senior monastics of the Ramakrishna Order, such as Swamis Gambhirananda, Bhuteshananda, Nityaswarupanada, and others, visited her home. It is now displayed in the museum at Belur Math. Swami Gambhirananda wrote an article about his visit to Miss Copeland—who he thought was a hermit in the forest, because her house in a rural community was set back from the road in a wooded area. Elizabeth would drive the visiting swamis to nearby historical places and places associated with Swami Vivekananda, such as Kate Sanborn’s house and the old railway line on which he had traveled. Having researched Swami Vivekananda’s visit to Kate Sanborn, she tried her best to have Kate Sanborn’s house preserved as a historical site, if not as a Vedanta center. Her efforts were unsuccessful.

Elizabeth’s father was a conservationist and not particularly religious, though he liked the swamis he met through his daughter. He lived till his late nineties. On his deathbed he asked for the photograph of Sri Ramakrishna which hung on the wall in his room. Pressing it to his heart, he peacefully breathed his last. Apparently Elizabeth’s entire family had been blessed for generations by Swami Vivekananda.

Up until her death Elizabeth regularly corresponded with Pravrajika Muktiprana, the first general secretary of Sri Sarada Math, and sent donations to the women’s monastic order even before its inception.

She lived to celebrate her ninetieth birthday at the Boston Vedanta Society. Swami Sarvagatananda, whom she drove back and forth every week to the center in Providence, Rhode Island, gave her a big party, inviting all the devotees who dearly loved her. She had lived a life of complete dedication to service of the swamis and devotees of both the New York



Elizabeth Copeland (left) with Swami Nikhilananda and Mabel Colloredo, a friend of Miss Copeland’s from Boston, at Thousand Island Park. Summer 1951.

“She is Sarada, Saraswati. She has come to impart knowledge. She has descended by covering up her beauty this time... She is full of wisdom. Is she of the common run? She is my Shakti.” — *Sri Ramakrishna*

and Boston Vedanta centers. For many years she prepared the cottages at the Thousand Island Park retreat center for guests, opening and closing the cottages every summer. She had a very strong and positive “New England” personality. People were not the only recipients of her love and service. She loved animals. A childhood photograph of her showed her fearlessly holding up a pancake to a bear in Yellowstone National Park. Elizabeth had taught zoology at Smith College, and later kept a kennel. At the end of her life she had a menagerie of pets in her house: three cats, a dog, a snake she named Vasuki, and two dozen or so uncaged parakeets. She loved to tell the story of her pet parrot, who sat on his perch with his head tilted, peering with one eye at a visiting Unitarian minister and squawking “Ramakrishna!”

In November 1983 Elizabeth made a pilgrimage to India with two other devotees, thus fulfilling a long cherished desire. While there, she gave a quilt-sized knitted afghan which she had made to Swami Vireswarananda, who was then president of the order. The colorful afghan illustrated parables told by Sri Ramakrishna.

Elizabeth Copeland passed away on January 28, 1999. At her memorial service, Swami Sarvagatananda, minister of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Boston, noted that she was “unselfish, all loving and deeply concerned about the welfare of others” and that her example demonstrated Holy Mother’s answer to the question, “How do we know so-and-so loves God?” When asked by the swami how it was that she could love all people, Elizabeth had replied: “If you train animals and love them in spite of their mischief, you can love anybody in the world.”

“It is a great joy for me to know a person like this...that we had an opportunity to be with her and she with us,” the swami added.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Elizabeth Copeland wrote several poems on Vedantic themes. The poem printed at right is entitled “To Swami Vivekananda.” It was published in SAMVIT in March 2003.



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satisfaction of knowing one made the effort, and that is as much as we can do—to make the effort and then leave the rest to karma, to the grace of the Lord, or however you want to put it.

There are occasions when one may be falling apart briefly, but rather than just throw up one’s hands and say, “Why me?” ask, “Why not me, why not this?” It will not be easy, but it’s something everyone has to go through. Rather than trying to escape, it is better to just try to accept whatever comes and detach yourself from it.

TO SWAMIJI

Thou who burst all bonds asunder
Flooding all the world with light
Of Truth Eternal, shining brightly
Through the ages in the Great...
Thou who had the strength of Rama,
Sita’s pure unswerving faith,
Buddha’s heart and voice of Krishna,
Tempered with Sri Radha’s love,
Thou who moved on feet of Christ Child,
Touching with thy Master’s hand,
By Sarada’s grace protected,
Ramakrishna’s Power Divine,
Breath of Shiva and the Mother...

Thou, O Great One, left the body,
How could body sheathe thy soul
Which was Spirit Universal
Vibrant throughout all the world?
Thou did leave unnumbered children
Scattered over all the earth.
Young and old of every colour,
Thou had taken all to care for.
Whom had they in life but thee?
Ever guiding through the darkness
Toward the Goal and Liberty.

Through thee they could find thy master,
Him who came to save mankind.
Ever will the touch be on them,
Bodies changing none will mind
Though the hidden anguish lingers
Smouldering within them still.
Beloved Guru, lead thy children
In this land to whom thou
Entrusted with thy sacred mission.
Let them feel, and make them know!
True and steady, ever onward,
Looking neither right nor left,
He is treading on thy pathway,
Chosen child, forever blessed.
May the others follow bravely,
Let them lead whenever they can,
Living boldly in thy teaching,
Working it throughout the land.

In the silence of thy presence
Poignant with the love of God,
May thy children’s anguish vanish
Giving place to joy unknown...
In the face of him thou gave them
Have them look, and see thine own

Elizabeth Copeland

“You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of Mother’s life, none of you. But gradually you will know. Without Shakti (Power) there is no regeneration for the world.” – Swami Vivekananda

Book Review

PRACTICAL INSIGHTS

UNDERSTANDING VEDANTA LECTURE SERIES-1. THE PATH OF KNOWLEDGE by Pravrajika Vivekaprana. TransEdit Communications, New Delhi, copyright 2007, Ramakrishna Sarada Mission. 92 pp.

The first in a new series of published talks by Pravrajika Vivekaprana, *THE PATH OF KNOWLEDGE* is based on lectures delivered in Santa Barbara, California, in December 2005. Using the second chapter of the *BHAGAVAD GITA* as a point of departure, Pravrajika Vivekaprana focuses on the relevance of these ancient teachings to our lives today. This book, however, is not another commentary on the *GITA*. Rather, it presents an inspired overview of the human predicament and offers practical solutions for spiritual aspirants. While *THE PATH OF KNOWLEDGE* may be appreciated by a newcomer to Vedanta, it is clearly intended for those who are familiar with the basic concepts of Vedanta as expounded by the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition.

Pravrajika Vivekaprana reminds us of truths so easily forgotten: “Whenever something unpleasant occurs we feel it is wrong and bad, tragic, abnormal, and ‘should not be’.... No one tells us how life actually is. This difference between should and is [is] very clearly revealed in the Bhagavad Gita.” In her chapter entitled ‘The Paradox of ‘Should’ and ‘Should Not Be,’ Vivekaprana concludes, “‘Should be’ comes from just below the level of consciousness so we can say it is a bundle of preconceived notions that we accumulate over the years as we live our life.... The real sign of preparedness is to expect the subconscious to rise to the conscious level at critical moments. It [normally] rises to ‘attack’ when we are least prepared. What are we least prepared for? We are

least prepared to let go of our existence.”

Another potent reminder comes in the chapter Attitude and Attention. Vivekaprana describes the tragic condition of our minds, when, as children “we are guided back to the material level and told this is all there is. It is like sentencing the human mind to eternal imprisonment in this material world of the senses within which we are constrained to do our seeking.” In our effort to transcend—but ignorant of the ultimate goal—the mind merely engages in a “game of transcending.” Instead, we must go beyond the ego-centered personality and change drastically. “This drastic change is given as the goal to Arjuna by Krishna, by his saying, ‘You think you speak very wisely, but you do not.’”

Although we are counseled to “change drastically,” Vivekaprana says, “We do not need to make drastic changes in our lifestyle. We just need to understand the goal; understand the movements of the mind; and realize that we are metaphysical to begin with. If we want the whirlwind, then that is also available, but we must not complain. Letting go has to finally become highly conscious.... Stillness is the food of the mind. The goal is personal research. Our attitude and attention show the path.

The final chapter, Questions and Answers, considers such questions as, “How is it that the ego does not help me in my journey?” and “Ego is a ray of Atman. What does that mean?” These questions and others offer compelling food for thought that will in turn assist us in our quest to transcend thought—and the mind, as we know it.

THE PATH OF KNOWLEDGE begs to be re-read—even a few pages at a time—and contemplated. It is at times exquisitely simple in its message. At other times it is so conceptually dense—despite its accessible style—that one wishes for greater elaboration as a publication of larger scope.

Esther Warkov.

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